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KOREAN AIRLINER INCIDENT:

KOPPEL: One year after the shooting down of Flight 007, there are still more questions than answers about what really happened that night. We may never know, for example, why the plane was hundreds of miles off course, flying over top-secret Soviet military installations, whether the crew had misprogramed the flight navigation computer or if the computer in some way malfunctioned. And there have been many questions about the nature of U.S. intelligence operations in the area. ABC's John McWethy has been on special assignment.

MCWETHY: The Soviets, in an extraordinary campaign to influence world opinion, have steadfastly maintained that Flight 007 was a spy mission. The U.S. has just as adamantly held that such allegations are ludicrous, a lame effort by the Soviets to shift blame from their own shoulders for committing what the U.S. says was cold-blooded murder. U.S. intelligence sources now concede that the interceptor pilots probably did not know they were shooting at an unarmed passenger liner, thinking instead it was a spy plane. The most important pieces of evidence, the plane itself and its flight recorder, were never found by search teams in the Sea of Japan, just meaningless debris. That has left the world with tantalizing bits of speculation and facts that have been interpreted in many different ways. Was the Korean airliner on an outright spy mission for the U.S. or South Korea, specially equipped with cameras and intelligence-gathering equipment? GEORGE\CARVER (former CIA official): This is not the sort of thing that Americans would ever do for intelligence purposes, which is to put innocent civilian lives at risk, particularly in a peacetime situation.

MCWETHY: Even the harshest critics of the CIA's methods and morals agree that this was not an outright spy mission and there is no compelling evidence that it was. More plausible is a second possibility, that the U.S. intelligence community, with it's vast network of spy satellites and radars, was at some level watching Flight 007 stray off course into the Soviet Union and decided not to warn the airliner it was in danger. The supposed thinking behind this was that even the Soviets would not shoot down a passenger plane, and that the errant flight would be an intelligence bonanza as radar beacons lit up along the Soviet coastline. The U.S. government says its intelligence network did not know anything unusual was going on until after the plane was shot down. James Bamford is an author who spent years studying the U.S. intelligence community. JAMES\BAMFORD (author): It seems very incredible to me that the United States had no

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indications whatsoever via the aircraft flying off course or Soviet reaction to it. If the intelligence community did miss that, it seems like an extraordinary gap.

MCWETHY: As extensive as the U.S. intelligence gathering network may be, officials claim it does not have the capability to see or hear nearly as much around the world as people give it credit for. The Korean airliner was far beyond the range of U.S. ground-based radar when it crossed into Soviet territory. Earlier, while still within range of U.S. military radar, the airliner was already off course, but no one paid any attention--not their job to track civilian planes. A U.S. RC-135 spy plane was near Flight 007 that night but never closer than 70 miles, at the edge of its radar range. Intelligence sources claim the spy plane never saw the passenger liner. The RC-135 was on a routine mission code-named Cobra Ball. It had been flying in circles off the Russian coast for hours waiting for a possible Soviet missile test. The Russians did not fire the missile that night and the RC-135 was heading for home when it came closest to Flight 007, hundreds of miles off the coast. Intercepts of Soviet radio transmissions are often the best way to monitor activity. The U.S. does so around the clock. Sources within the intelligence community say U.S. technicians should have been aware that a Soviet air defense alert was under way, even though it might not have been considered all that unusual. The Soviets, just like Americans, practice such alerts all the time. The U.S. government, however, denies that it was aware of any part of the two-hour chase across Soviet territory that had Russian pilots scrambling from the Kamchatka Peninsula to Sakhalin Island. BAMFORD: It's possible, however, it's not very likely. And if it is true that the United States did not know anything about it, I think that's a very major problem.

MCWETHY: Intelligence officials say when they want to find out about Soviet air defenses, rather than draw up an elaborate plot involving civilian airliners, they do it by flying an SR-71 spy plane over Russian territory. It's one of the world's fastest aircraft and can fly at the edge of space, making it extremely difficult to shoot it down. As it flies, Soviet radars light up and interceptors scramble. Meanwhile, along the coast, safely in international waters, the U.S. will also fly an RC-135 spy plane to monitor all the activity, a different type of RC-135 than was off the Soviet coast the night Flight 007 went down. So after a year of charge and countercharge by the Soviet Union and the United States, there are still intriguing possibilities about who and what caused the tragedy of the Korean airliner and what the superpowers really knew. Three facts remain, however, the Soviets shot down a plane they never fully identified, 269 people died and the Kremlin has made it clear if faced with a similar situation they will do it again. John McWethy, ABC News, the Pentagon.